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‘Thinking outside the box’:  
Trade union organising strategies and  
Polish migrant workers in the UK

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Presentation at the  
ESRC Cross Border Trade Union Collaboration and Polish  
Migrant Workers in Britain

academic dissemination event 1<sup>st</sup> October 2008

## Methodology: ESRC project

Investigate trade union organising strategies in Poland and UK with regard to Polish migrant workers in the UK;

- Interviews with UK national officers dealing with this (TUC, BFAWU, GMB, T&G and USDAW) + regional officials and some workplace research undertaken;
- Case study regions were Eastern and 'North'.

# Extent and Issues

- Polish migration constitutes largest ever in-migration to UK (Salt and Millar 2006)
- Vexation at national and local level on actual figures. Facts:
  - WRS more A8s registered in North than London & SE

*“We strongly believe that you can’t approach this in traditional union ways. We have to be imaginative and think out of the box” (Usdaw)*

- Ubiquitous – Poles in particular low paid sectors but widely dispersed
- Transient – cheap transport; agency influence
- Mobilisation – social injustice with sometimes horrendous conditions
- Social dumping – *“Large numbers of our members caught between a rock and a hard place with agency labour increasing. Our members feel threatened” (T&G)*

# Inclusion

- Exclusion – Non acceptance of agency workers, migrants out first agreements etc.
- Tensions emerging:
  - Packaging and profiling campaigns (vulnerable workers)  
*“I think it is important to identify that we support vulnerable workers everywhere. We support all people who need help.... for us politically, with a small p, it sends out a message that we are interested in all workers not just those from abroad” (TUC)*

Issues with this *“I’m not convinced this will help unions organise effectively. It is important to address migrant workers not as vulnerable workers, but as a specific ‘migrant worker’ group” (T&G)*

- Scale of support: unions reported ‘frank discussions’ on migrant worker issue; One union quotas to quell influx.

# New terrains of recruitment and organising

- Internationally mobile Pole brings differing sets of issues and challenges
- How can this be seen?
  - Targeting: Unions spoke of targeting Poles. Usdaw regions and plants where they have presence & large number of agency workers;
  - Engagement and trust: BFAWU project attitudes to membership; learning ESOL projects (learning centres & GMB fishing trip; GMB music project).
  - New &/or customisation of policy: managed activism/tension between servicing new and established members *“None of our unions are sitting there with pots of money”* (TUC)
  - Voice & self organisation: *“New Polish members have to be able to stand their own corner”* (GMB)

# Reconfiguring domestic networks

- National level: Govt campaigning (Gangmasters legislation); attempts at dialogue through Vulnerable Workers Commission and other reports and publicity “..we can’t replace the remit of enforcement agencies, so we have to pressure them. At some stage we may have to take a very strong case to an agency and dare them not to take enforcement action. If they don’t act we should then consider a judicial review” (T&G);
- Regional level: Last decade engagement with governance at regional level. Developed with Polish influx e.g. Migrant Workers North West and in North East;
- Local level: Through ‘new actors’ CABx; other NGOs; solicitors; and others (Rift/Ucatt) and community organising through established Polish community and church etc. However, “..these providers often involve us in promising services that we are not able to deliver” (GMB)

# Forging new international linkages

- Engagement at TUC and affiliate levels;
- Jane discuss more this afternoon;



# Conclusions

- Pattern of Polish entry into UK labour market has dictated early trade union response;
- Now moving towards strategic decisions often dependent on resources;
- Poles joining unions but often based on organised workplaces;
- But they are becoming active as workplace reps and buddies. Most unions now had Polish full-time organisers with T&G having at least 7;
- Discussions of renewal on the horizon *“one of the reasons why we are getting involved with Solidarnosc is that people may be coming back again. Indeed there are likely to be Poles who get their first experience of trade unionism in UK and take it back to Poland”* (TUC);
- We believe that four typologies are not mutually exclusive and will develop and change.